CHINOISERIE AND VERS LIBRE

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ONE of the results of our rising contemporary interest in the ethnic cultures of the world is the very obvious debt our poets owe to the Orient. The individual poet may be conscious or not of this indebtedness, but the leaders of the new movement have recognized it, and written of it. It is my purpose to compare the spirit and general poetic theory of modern English prosody with the Oriental, from which it is assumed much has been derived.

No river can be traced to any single source. Its water comes from numerous fields and woods and springs, slowly filtering down to join in a score of streams, which in turn join to make a river. In the history of English poetry, no single origin can be designated as strictly the only source of any movement. Generally, in each literary generation, one may witness a growth of oratorical and discursive writings, followed by a reaction in favor of concision. This is true of most literatures; the pendulum is never still.

The significant thing in our present discussion of the poetic relations of the East and West is that the reactions of English and American poets from the profuseness of the Victorian vogue to the concision of modern imagistic and vers libre movements was developing simultaneously with Occidental interest in the Pacific-Asian religions and literatures. There appears to be an identity of interest between the Oriental and the modern Occidental. Their affinity is marked. To the initiated eye the potency of the Oriental leaven is everywhere evident, in the output of the founders of the vers libre movement, the imagists, and subsequent contemporary poets. Everywhere appear poems after the Chinese manner, adaptations, parodies, translations spurious and accurate, attempts to capture the subtle method, or the fragile thought, or the psychology of the Oriental. This stream of Orientalism in English poetry has

been welcomed by the leaders whenever they have understood its significance and beauty fully. Some poets have had a mere superficial liking for the methods and work of the Oriental, their own work in turn showing the results of this superficialty. Others have sincerely studied the language and philosophy of the people. From such work much may be expected.

II

The first English translator from Chinese poetry, and the first to prophesy of its results, was Sir John Davis, the first governor of Hong Kong. He gave to the English speaking world its initial insight into Chinese poetry when he published *The Poetry of The Chinese* in 1829. In it he wrote this prophecy:

> "As our gardens have already been indebted to China for a few choice flowers, who knows but our poetry may some day lie under a similar obligation?"

A half century later, in 1883, before Lafcadio Hearn had made Japan the land of his adoption, he wrote of his interest in Oriental verse and prophesied in the editorial columns of the *New Orleans Times-Democrat*:

> "The ideas of the Orient are only now being fully understood and appreciated; they are certainly destined to influence Occidental thought more than superficially. The flowers of Western idealism will be marvellously improved by crossing with Eastern literary growths."

But the words of Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry*, and high priestess of the new movement, who wrote when it was well under way, will best show the rise of a consciousness among the poets themselves of the affinity existing between their methods and the Oriental:

> "This Oriental influence is to be welcomed because it flows from deep and original streams of poetic art. We should not be afraid to learn from it, and in much of the work of the imagists and other radical groups, we find a more or less conscious, and more or less effective yielding to that influence. We find something of the Oriental directness of vision and simplicity of diction; also now and then a hint of the unobstrusive Oriental perfection of form and delicacy of feeling."

Thus the rise of Orientalism in modern English poetry was foretold and welcomed.

III

There is no better way I know of, to take a just measure of the extent this influence has been effective, than to consider the cardinal principles governing the writing of the new poetry and to draw parallels between these and the Oriental. There one may see where the differences and similarities lie.

Since Amy Lowell has done most of the pleading for imagism and the new school, the six rules she laid down in the preface to one of the first anthologies of the movement, entitled *Some Imagist Poets*, may well be used as a basis of comparison. The principles of imagism, she tells us, "are not new; they have fallen into desuetude. They are the essentials of all great poetry, indeed of all great literature. . . . . ."

The first principle was—"To use the language of common speech, but to employ always the exact word, never the nearly exact, nor the merely decorative word." Every school boy now knows that the phrase "language of common speech" is an echo of Wordsworth's *Preface to The Lyrical Ballads*, but the remainder of the rule shows well enough, paradoxical as it may seem, why the new school found an affinity in the Chinese and Japanese. In the revolt against the merely decorative word, in the search for the word with its sharp edges undulled by much mouthing and meaningless association, they found in the simplicity of the Chinese image, the root-idea of the character, an answer to their desires.

There is no similarity between the poetic method of the Chinese and the English. The poet of the latter culture has traditionally tried to make of his poem "an orchestra of words." I know of nothing in Chinese or Japanese poetry that can be compared to Tennyson's *Lotos Eaters* or Poe's *Bells*. The Chinese poet strove for his sound effect, but it was based on "tones" of the language and a strict adherence to the rules of stressed and unstressed syllables. These are distinguished in poetry by two tones. They are either flat, that is, pronounced with level or even utterance, or deflected upwards or downwards or cut short. The latter correspond crudely to our accented syllables in Greek and Latin. The Chinese poet constructs the most ordinary stanza with an ear for the utmost symmetry, as, for instance, if A stands for stressed and B for unstressed syllable, it will run as follows:

A A B B A
B B A A B
B B B A A
A A A B B

John Erskine has pointed out that there are even now diverging language movements in English poetry. The cadence of American speech is no longer that of the English, and since it was from the English models that the best American poets fifty years ago learned the cadence of both their speech and verse, it is not surprising that the American ear today detects a strange, almost foreign note in the fall of the lines of such poets as Tennyson, Lowell and Longfellow. Americans speak with more directness, with less subtlety and delay. Our conversation is a series of hammer strokes. We seem hungry for verse the cadence of which will be native to our ears.

One of the reasons why our poets find such a fascination in Oriental verse may be discovered here. The monosyllabic, steady, hammerstroke fall of words captivates their ear—if they know of Chinese and Japanese poetry in the original. Few of them do. And yet, by and large, there is the paradox that the Chinese literary renaissance is turning from that in which our modern English poetic renaissance finds such inspiration. We must look elsewhere for the source of the poetic sympathy between East and West. The language of Chinese classical poetry, in which Western interest has been centered, is not the language of common speech. Commonly designated as the "wen-li," it is the language of the sages and pedantic scholars, a language without inflection, a language of terse, concentrated root-ideas.

The story is told of Browning's introduction to a Chinese ambassador in London. Browning affably enquired of him what style of poetry he most affected and was answered the *enigmatical*. "We felt," he says in telling the tale, "doubly friends after that." Not only the Chinese literary language, but the poetry itself, with its classic allusions, is enigmatical. It does not employ the vernacular of the common man. Furthermore, it constantly uses the conventions of the ancients, and eschews realism and the commonplace. The source of the poetic sympathy between the East and West is not to be found in the first of Miss Lowell's principles.

IV

The second rule was—"To create new rhythms—as the expression of new moods—and not to employ old rhythms, which merely echo old moods. We do not insist upon 'free verse' as the only method of writing poetry. We fight for it as a principle of liberty. We believe that the individuality of a poet may often be better expressed in free verse than in conventional forms. In poetry a new cadence means a new idea."

On this principle I can again see no common ground on which the new spirits of the West may meet with the classical poets of the East. Chinese poetry is iron bound in laws and principles, with never the freedom exercised in the history of English prosody. The art of poetry in China has had a long evolution. It has been raised through the centuries by the genius of its makers to a standard of excellence which can be favorably compared with that of any civilization. But the Chinese have also developed the most rigid and traditional patterns and verse forms. The character of the language has determined some of the structural peculiarities of its verse. In early times four words to a line was the rule, but any number up to eight was allowable. Even one word lines were found. The stanza was usually in the form of a quatrain, although it could consist of any number of lines up to sixteen or seventeen. Every line did not rhyme, although rhyme was considered an essential part of all verse. Blank verse in the Miltonic sense was unknown. It may moreover be noticed that in connection with the structure of Chinese poems, the sense generally runs in couplets, and the moral or finale of the thought is given in the last two lines, much in the same way as in Shakespeare's sonnets the concluding lines sum up the sense of the whole.

The complaint frequently made against Victorian poetry, by our contemporary poetic radicals is that it is vague, that its eloquence springs from pomposity and verbiage, that it has no individuality or personality of its own, because everything, diction and rhythm, all are subservient to a definite pattern. It was to be free from the many rules and formulae which encumbered poetry that Miss Lowell lead the fight as "a principle of liberty." These innovators then turned to Chinese and Japanese poetry, thinking that there would be found the embodiment of their ideas. The interest was first centered in the Japanese hokku, later in the uta, and now in

the many forms of Chinese poetry. These forms, they declared were the prototypes of many new ideas among their contemporaries. Yet these forms were bound by the most rigid of century-old formulae and rules. The Chinese and Japanese are turning from them in their own renaissance. Consistency should have kept our Western poets from a whole hearted turning from one iron bound system of prosody to another. Possibly it was but a passing fancy, a fad. Still there was sufficient charm in this poetry of the East to attract our best minds. It of necessity was something more than form, for here the two systems are diametrically opposed.

V

Miss Lowell's third rule was—"To allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject. . . . ."

Other than the prejudices and taboos of conventional society, no acts of parliament control the poets' choice of subject. This is true of any literature. However, few writers are able to transcend their own times. Anyone who will read consistently in Chinese poetry cannot but be impressed with the ever present farewell poem written when leaving for a foreign province upon some mission of state, or the ubiquitous drinking song, conventional types that run through the entire history of Chinese literature. These were the most common and were molded by circumstance. But there are other impressive aspects. A love of birds, flowers and clouds, of mists, waters, hills and the moon are ever present characteristics of Chinese poetry and art in every age. Nature—the universe is the Chinese poet's field. And he exercises the widest liberty in indulging his passion for the things of nature. What he produces is not primitive or elemental in feeling, nor is it mere enjoyment of the sensuous. If a comparison may be permitted, he is more Wordsworthian than Keatsian. His poetry is a chastened and subdued product of reflection, for he regards Nature not merely as a physical phenomenon with sensuously enjoyable qualities, but as an animating soul which is in intimate relation with life itself. For him spirit interpenetrates matter. He is a thoroughgoing mystic. He is not satisfied with merely a faithful reproduction or presentation of what he sees and feels, although he does this supremely well. His desire is to render Nature's more subtle and essential aspects, for in them he believes he finds the way towards an appreciation of the laws of our being and the universe as a whole.

The Chinese poet obtained his view of the cosmos from Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism. With it is possibly an infiltration of the monism which came from India through Buddhism. But Confucius also had a hand in molding the poet. Confucius' insistence on this world and the benefits of practical propriety exerted a tremendous influence on the common people, and the poet did not escape it. In him is traceable the influence of these three religions. He devotes himself to this world, its cosmic laws, its sensuous beauties, and the serious problems of statecraft and social propriety enjoined by Confucius. But he constantly aspired to a larger vision of things. He felt the limitations of a regulated life; he strove to relate his own existence to a more comprehensive whole. Here he resorted to the philosophy of Lao Tzu which conceived of Nature as an infinite process of self creation, one stage of development succeeding another more perfect in its greater proximity to the ultimate reality. To Lao Tzu the way to solve human life was to do nothing, to be carried along by the mighty current of the cosmos. The way, he said, to clear the world of its dirt and muddy aspect was identically the way one cleared a bucket of muddy water. Agitation, an attempt to be rid of the impurities, merely prolonged their evil influence and presence. The thing to do was to do nothing. The sediment would settle to the bottom, the water would clear itself. So with man and his world. With a wise passivity the eternal Way would exert itself.

But the humanizing influence of Confucius who was preoccupied with man himself, and declared that man began where Nature left off, was accepted by many of the poets. This acceptance saved them from the inevitable passivity of a consistent following of Lao Tzu. The merging of these two views of life sometimes produced a poetry of great profundity. Their imaginations synthesized the idyllic view which Toaism tends to exalt, with a human element and an interest in a phenomenal world, as well as cosmic principles. The Chinese poets varied in the degree and intensity with which these views predominated, but the result in many cases was a great and deep poetry. In constant touch with the Over-Soul, and with their feet planted firmly on the ground, they had a universe in which to breathe and write. Many made use of their privileges and opportunities.

There is no wonder that the modern Occidental poets, few of whom have managed to keep in touch with the empyrean and the

world at the same time, yearned for the freedom and air in which the Chinese poets breathed and wrote.

VI

The remaining three precepts laid down by Miss Lowell may be discussed together. They were:

"4. To present an image (hence the name: Imagist). We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous. . . . .

"5. To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite.

"6. Finally, most of us believe that concentration is the very essence of poetry."

It was quite natural that English poetry, which had long been under the influence of periphrastic verbosity, should find much to admire in the brief and concise images of Oriental verse. It was equally natural that the Chinese themselves should react from that which had long been petrified by an over-emphasis upon a contentless formalism. Arthur Waley has pointed out that the bane of Chinese poetry was classic allusion. In general, however, Chinese poetry at its best is in the lyric form. Their posts anticipated Edgar Allan Poe in the thought that there in reality could be no such thing as a *long* poem. When we examine the Chinese lyric at its best, what impresses us is the unusual economy of words with which the most elusive thoughts are expressed. The number of words to a verse varies from three to nine, the most common being five and seven, four such verses often going to make up a complete poem. The form, then is far more restricted than the sonnet. But within the limit of such verses a skillful artist is able to reveal his whole personality, and the intensity and magnitude of the mood which possessed him when he wrote. Every poem he composes is the expression of a whole range of feelings which he has pondered over and recollected in tranquility. What he aims at is not the pure expression of his feelings, because he knows that too much spontaneity in such expression without due regard to their careful adjustment and synthesis is apt to be crude and finally to defeat its own end; for an excessive outpouring of the natural temperament would soon exhaust itself.

The Chinese critics have told him from time immemorial that

the primary interest in poetry is to be found in the feelings and passions. He subjects, however, these feelings and passions to the imaginative reason. When they emerge, they are no longer in their original state of crudity; they have been suffused, transmuted, refined. The product is new and rich in content. His feelings and passions have been delicately fused together and unified. Furthermore, in expressing them, he has taken care not to give a complete account of that with which he deals: he leaves it to the reader to create in his own mind that impression of completeness and totality which he wishes to give. The reader is not a passive recipient: the Chinese poet expects him to be a creative artist himself, willing to be personally as much attached to the poem as the poet.

The poem, the link between the poet and his reader, is thought of as something supple and flexible, consisting of only a few flashes of insight or intuition into the mysteries of life and nature. It is a comprehension of the underlying forces of human nature, of the cosmos, which the poet wishes to attain. All he does is to express a few of the significant phases of the understanding he has attained. From these the reader constructs for himself the complete experience which these phases represent. This is best represented in the poetic form most commonly known as the "stop-short," a four line poem. In it, the poet leads his reader up to the gates of Infinity, as it were; it is for the reader himself to go through those gates.

A great deal of poetic appreciation thus depends on the reader. He must be sensitive to all fine touches; he must be susceptible to the delicate impressions furnished to him; above all, he must be a poet himself, to build for himself from the casual notes presented to him, the beauty and real meaning of the original experience. The Chinese do not consider it the poet's function to give a careful account of his experiences. In order to feel the real intensity and power of that experience, they say, the reader himself must be in direct contact with it, he must be as it were a human Aeolian harp, delicately catching the notes which the poet lets loose, and in turn rendering them again into mellow music and harmony.

This very quality, I think it is, which attracts the Western imagists and vers librists. It has infinite variety and power, and an inexhaustible charm extremely elusive to the understanding. A poetic gem of this sort, dealing with the essence of life, may be interpreted both by the reader and the poet to embody so much

truth and beauty that the more they ponder over it, the more they find it limitless and unfathomable. The poem suggests far more than it says—the very quality for which most moderns desperately strive. It is all the while simple, the substance with which it deals apparently sensuous, and yet there is a profundity and an intimate contact with cosmic, ultimate reality, which it reveals only in parts, allowing the reader himself to comprehend the whole. One will look far before a higher type of lyric poetry is found.

Returning once again to the rules laid down by Miss Lowell, we find that the Chinese poet might almost have consciously followed the injunction to "present an image, not vague generalities, however magnificent or sonorous." He gives us our image. And it is also "hard and clear, never blurred and indefinite." Miss Lowell would also have concentration, for it is "the essence of poetry." The Chinese poet, through the nature of his language, has concentrated with a vengeance.

The elements which have been infused into our poetry from the East are not principally matters of form and meter, although we have experimented with the hokku, uta, and stop-short. The things we have received are chaste simplicity, unaffectedness, directness, and delicacy of feeling. Kipling's declaration that the East and West would never meet is being disproven, for the twain *are* meeting—in poetry. But the East did not send us missionaries, telling of its poetic wealth. The West stumbled upon it and fell in love with it.